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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIJING 024430

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KCUL](#) [SOCI](#) [CH](#)
SUBJECT: NOT YOUR HIGH SCHOOL HISTORY TEXT: "RISE OF THE
GREAT POWERS" CREATES STIR IN BEIJING

Classified By: Political Section Internal Unit Chief Susan A. Thornton.
Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

Summary

11. (C) A popular CCTV-2 documentary "The Rise of the Great Powers" has set Beijing's chattering classes abuzz in recent weeks. The 12-part series tells the story of how nine nations, including the UK, Japan, Russia and the United States, rose to become great powers at various points in history. Some observers contend that the documentary constitutes a watershed because it takes a relatively objective look at history without adding a propagandistic gloss. Others note that the program's subtext of a) reform and opening to the outside world, including adopting western ideas, b) governments/rulers being responsive to their people, c) pragmatism over ideology and d) national unity is a barely veiled and sanctioned prescription for China's rise. Contacts said the documentary aired without prior approval from Propaganda or other Central Government authorities. The press has seized on the show's popularity and Internet forums are flooded with commentary. Contacts we spoke to said they are anxious to see how censors react to the program's popularity and publicity, noting that the reaction will reveal much about the limits on public discourse regarding reform. End Summary.

How to Be Great

12. (C) "Rise of the Great Powers" aired initially in November and is currently in its second run on CCTV-2. The series presents the key factors and turning points in each of the nine countries' route to great power status, telling the story through the personalities and ideas of major historical figures, with accompanying analysis by both Chinese and foreign experts. The content is implicitly supportive of the current Chinese leadership's direction and stresses the benefits of pragmatic policymaking, especially in economics. Throughout the narrative, national pride and domestic unity are clear catalysts for development across the board, the implication being that each country is unique and must choose its own path. Nonetheless, the series underlines that openness to ideas from abroad helped each country advance and that market mechanisms are crucial for economic growth.

Surprise: Objective Treatment of Old Nemeses

13. (C) What has surprised observers is the lack of an overt propaganda slant to the documentary. In fact, the series corrects some misperceptions about the past, said Ding Dong (protect), a historian and outspoken advocate for free speech. The production "is not your old history textbook from school," he remarked, adding that when addressing world history, the Chinese curriculum tends to emphasize the evils

of colonialism and capitalism. Among the surprises:

-- British colonialism was given decidedly low-profile treatment. Even the Opium War, played up in traditional Chinese historical accounts as a prime example of rapacious and morally bankrupt British policies, is not mentioned.

-- The German segment underscored the great influence of German social philosophy on the Europe of the 19th century but did not mention Karl Marx. It focused instead on Friedrich List, a proponent of strong state intervention in the economy and state-owned industry.

Q-- While the documentary showed footage of Japan's invasion of China in 1937, it did not mention the Nanjing Massacre or other hot-button "history" issues of today. Instead it emphasized Japan's ability to absorb positive influences from abroad while maintaining its own character. "The lesson from Japan is that any rising power must focus internally on bringing prosperity to its people and externally on bringing peace and security to the world," the moderator pronounces.

-- The United States receives positive treatment, with ample discussion of the values that underpin democracy, including constitutional government and a multi-party system. The roles of Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln and FDR were highlighted as were the importance of the Mayflower Compact, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. The segment also stressed the role of intellectual property rights protection in spurring technological innovation and entrepreneurial activity.

Genesis: A Politburo Meeting

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14. (C) Chinese commentators and contacts we spoke with rejected assertions that the documentary was commissioned by President Hu Jintao or that it presents a Party-ordained view of the past. They generally ascribed the genesis of the series to a 2003 Politburo study session at which Hu Jintao and other leaders discussed how various countries attained global prominence. News of the meeting was reported by Xinhua at the time and inspired CCTV-2 producers to launch the project, CCTV contacts reported. Production took three years and required a budget of some RMB 10 million (USD 1.25 million). Several prestigious advisors had a hand in shaping the content, including Wang Jisi, Dean of the School of International Relations at Beijing University and Qian Chengdan, a Beijing University history professor who was one of the lecturers at the Politburo meeting on world history three years ago.

No Prior Approval

15. (C) The program received no prior stamp of approval from the Propaganda Department or any other Central Government authority, said CCTV-9 producer and longtime Embassy contact Li Xiaoping (protect). She said CCTV-2 deputy programming editor Yuan Zhenmin decided to green light the project despite concerns that the censors might squelch the show. A number of issues had worried CCTV management, Li remarked. First, using the word "rise" in the title was seen as risky because the term China's Peaceful Rise, coined previously by Hu Jintao advisor Zheng Bijian, was controversial and, ultimately, dropped. The other worry, Li said, is that the Propaganda Department or even top leadership will be unable to accept the production's core messages, which she listed as: a) it is okay to discuss reform, b) democracy is not bad and c) it is acceptable for China to incorporate lessons from abroad into its development plan.

It's Really About China

¶16. (C) While "Rise" examines what made other countries prosper, the subject of China's own political, economic and social development is never far from the surface. Wang Jisi wrote on the CCTV website that he is "confident that every group of viewers watching the program will be thinking about China." The country is at an important crossroads in implementing reforms, judged Xu Fangzhou (protect), a professor at the Beijing Broadcasting Institute who supports greater media freedom. The documentary's director, Ren Xue'an, was a student of Xu's at the Institute. "Is China a great power? The show's message is, not yet," Xu maintained. As such, how China chooses to behave toward its own citizens and in the international community will affect its future status. The documentary posits that a variety of societal ingredients are necessary for a successful growth recipe, Xu said, adding that "Rise" opens up new possibilities for reform discussion in China. Talking about economics is one thing, but the program stresses that reform in areas such as politics and education are also important elements in a nation's development.

What Will the Censors Say?

¶17. (C) Against this backdrop, media insiders are watching to see what the Propaganda Department's reaction to "Rise" will be. So far there has been silence, although the rumor in the corridors at CCTV, Li told poloff, is that the only criticism to filter down has come from a Propaganda official who was unhappy that the segment on France failed to discuss Deng Xiaoping and Zhou Enlai's pre-revolutionary experiences there. Professor Xu forecast that the censors would respond in one of three ways, by a) banning the program and related media coverage, b) censuring the CCTV producers or c) doing nothing. If no ban emerges, broadcast executives will likely promote new documentaries examining China's dynastic history -- minus the heavy-handed political messages. Nonetheless, the Party leadership is unprepared to allow television to treat China's sensitive recent past with similar candor, Xu said. Ding separately agreed. He said an authoritative documentary on the "Reform and Opening" era, arguably the least sensitive period under Communist rule, would be impossible to produce because media discussion of the 1989 democracy movement and subsequent crackdown remains verboten.

Bootlegs and Bruised Egos

¶18. (C) The documentary's success has caused a stir at CCTV headquarters, Li related. There have been internal frictions

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because journalists at CCTV-1, especially those working on televised news magazines such as Focus, are jealous of CCTV-2's broadcasting coup. People are wondering why CCTV-1, the network's flagship station, is not producing such material. Professor Xu assessed that CCTV-2 has more flexibility because it receives less strict attention from the censors than CCTV-1. With its focus on economic issues, CCTV-2 has historically enjoyed more leeway. Meanwhile, IPR issues are vexing network management, Li related. Viewers can buy pirated copies of "Rise" in the subway station underpass opposite CCTV headquarters. This especially rankles because of the production's hefty price tag, Li said. One silver lining, she acknowledged, is that the prevalence of bootlegs is the one reliable gauge of the documentary's popularity, as the viewer ratings have not yet been released (and are of questionable accuracy).

Colorful Coverage

¶19. (C) Print and other media have seized on the popularity of "Rise of the Great Powers" and are running colorful coverage. The progressive weekly journal Southern Weekend and several high-circulation dailies, including The Beijing

News, have published lengthy interviews with the director and production advisors about the documentary's meaning. The China Youth Daily's respected weekly insert Freezing Point dedicated its November 29 issue to "Rise," including an interview with Mai Tianshu, the chief strategist for the program. Internet news portals such as Sina and Sohu have also posted considerable content on the subject. Much of the discussion has had a political flavor. One notable comment from the Guangdong Party daily website was rehosted on the Sina news site on December 2. The deputy editor of Southern Metropolis Weekly, Chang Ping, criticized two of the show's advisors for downplaying in a Southern Weekend interview the importance of freedom and democracy in the rise of the powers.

110. (C) Internet chat room traffic has also been heavy with lively debate about the documentary and what it means for China. Popular forums on Sina, Sohu and Tom.com have seen thousands of postings. Most netizens are praising the show for what they view as its straightforward treatment of history. Political postings appear to be in bounds as well. One forum participant on Sina wrote that "the key to great power status is an advanced political system! There is still a long way to go for China." In a similar vein, another chatter wrote that "no great power became wealthy by oppressing its own people."

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